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ABSTRACT

Perspectives concerning the recruitment of graduate students are offered, with attention to the size and resources of the department and the school, faculty involvement in recruitment efforts, pools of eligible prospects, and obligations to students. Factors affecting upper and lower limits to graduate enrollment are identified, including the number of faculty available for graduate advising. Graduate student recruiting should be coordinated through the graduate school office for a number of reasons, including the effectiveness of combining or coordinating recruitment efforts in closely related fields. General recruiting efforts must be supplemented by work at the departmental or program level. Faculty members can refer students to graduate departments at other schools and can tap potential graduate students from the pool of public school teachers, practicing professionals, and companies. Alumni are another recruitment resource; successful alumni from the program is a persuasive advocate. Applicant pools include undergraduates at the institution and from other institutions and professional groups outside the college. When a focus of recruitment is women, minorities, or foreign students, adequate services should be available to retain them. (SW)

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Graduate Recruiting: New Wine in Old Bottles

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As demographic trends turn downward for the age group traditionally the source of graduate students, as enrollment of American students drops in some fields, and as governing boards, commissions on higher education, and legislatures increasingly quantify accountability, graduate schools have discovered the virtues of recruiting.

Self interest is an obvious motive -- graduate administrators and faculty would like to keep their jobs -- but there are more significant reasons for recruiting: Our society needs a continuing supply of highly qualified scholars, researchers and practicing professionals in the fields taught in our graduate institutions. We need the next generation of teachers for those graduate programs. And our graduate faculty and students make major contributions to continuing research. Put simplistically, graduate study offers the most effective way to push our national brainpower to its highest levels. On the more personal level, graduate study allows students to push their individual capabilities to their highest levels, too.

Only recently, however, have we begun to move toward effective recruiting of graduate students. Many of our faculty still rely on their experience as graduate students in the 1960's and early '70's, and assume plenty of qualified students will apply each year. Indeed, they may resist active recruiting as unseemly hucksterism, quite beneath

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their dignity. In some cases there may be no cure for this attitude, but some faculty will respond to a strong dose of the facts of the case -- a review of the numbers, and of the consequences those numbers can create. In other cases, asking a faculty member to come along to a major graduate school day or other recruiting event may stimulate attitude changes. Seeing the recruiting efforts of other institutions, especially some of the most highly respected, has converted some of my most skeptical colleagues into believers.

The question of how much recruiting varies with the field and the department's size and resources. Upper limits to graduate enrollment may be set by the number of faculty available for graduate advising, or by the number of laboratory spaces available to graduate students, or possibly even by the number of seats in graduate courses the department can offer in a given term. When enrollment exceeds some such limit, the quality of the graduate student's experience in the program will deteriorate rapidly, and an overloaded faculty may quickly lose enthusiasm for the program. When upper limits are exceeded, it is not time to stop recruiting, but rather time to make admission standards more selective.

Lower limits on graduate enrollment are more difficult to define, but are also significant. Too few students in a program will restrict the number of courses that can be offered, making it difficult for students to get the variety of courses each might want individually, and possibly even making it difficult to graduate in a reasonable time. One of the best informal sources of learning for graduate students is other graduate students -- in classes, in seminars, in research projects, over

coffee, in shared offices. If numbers drop, this interchange may be limited or nonexistent, and students may miss an important part of the graduate study experience.

Worst of all, if graduate enrollment is too low, so that only two or three students want a given course, there is the temptation to offer that course as an overload. A good natured faculty member, moved by the pleas of one or two students, may agree to offer the course for them, over and above the normal teaching load. Department chairs are tempted to take advantage of such good nature and push graduate courses more and more into the "overload" category. The ultimate result, of course, is faculty resentment that finally looks upon graduate courses, and graduate students, as a nuisance and imposition. Then it is time either to get more students or abolish the program.

There is a difference between the types of recruiting needed by major, internationally known research universities, and the needs of smaller, less widely known, and perhaps master's only, schools. The major schools do not need to explain who they are or what general programs they offer. Instead, they can focus on specialized areas, and on research opportunities and financial assistance. Smaller schools, on the other hand, need more "institutional" advertising just to let prospective students know of their existence, of the fact that they offer graduate study, and of the range of fields in which they offer it. This kind of general advertising, the initial creation of an awareness of an institution and its programs, and the development of some sense of what that institution is like, is difficult to evaluate in terms of short-term results. MIT may be able to send out a flyer announcing

research assistantships in a specific laboratory, count the number of applications for those assistantships, and have a useful measure of the effectiveness of the flyer. Radford, on the other hand, may be sending out flyers to make prospective graduate students and professors on other campuses aware that the University has a given laboratory and offers graduate work in that field. Radford's flyers may produce increased applications that year, but they may also produce longer term effects two or three or more years into the future, just by giving the University new visibility. In such instances, the growing trend of evaluating recruiting efforts on short-term measures should be carefully considered and not always taken as a full measure of results.

Graduate student recruiting should be coordinated through the graduate school office for a number of reasons. Not every individual department will have either the knowledge of or the interest in recruiting, whereas the graduate school office can develop the expertise and then use it to assist many departments. Recruiting efforts in closely related fields can sometimes be combined or coordinated with an increase in effectiveness and a saving of money and effort. And the more general, "institutional" type of information efforts are more likely to be presented in a balanced, consistent way by a central office rather than by many individual departments. Finally, "general" recruiting opportunities, such as the CGS/GRE Forums and campus-wide Graduate and Professional School Days, are usually more effectively used by institutional representatives who are broadly informed about all graduate programs on a campus.

Such general recruiting efforts, however, must be supplemented by

work at the departmental or program level. Individual faculty members should be encouraged to establish and maintain contact with colleagues at other schools, to see that they know of the graduate program and refer their students to it. Through professional acquaintances they can tap into non-student pools of potential graduate students such as public school teachers, practicing professionals in the field, and private companies. They can give personal, individual attention to inquiries. And they can see that students in their program -- graduate and undergraduate -- have a good educational experience. In particular, they can make sure that the best of their own undergraduate students are encouraged to consider graduate study. It makes little sense to send representatives to the far corners of the country looking for graduate students if we neglect those on our own campuses. If a department prefers not to have its own undergraduates in its graduate program, on the ground that the students should be exposed to a different faculty, then perhaps reciprocal relationships can be developed between that department and strong departments elsewhere, to send each other their best students.

Besides the graduate school office and the departmental faculty, there is another resource for recruiting graduate students that should not be neglected: the alumni from the program. A graduate who is proud of his or her degree, who feels well prepared to succeed in the field, who has a high regard for the faculty and the institution, is probably the best, most persuasive advocate a program can have. Alumni often feel complimented to be asked to assist in recruiting efforts, and they may have a credibility with prospective students far beyond any

possessed by a faculty member or someone from the graduate school office.

Recruiters must become aware of the potential sources of recruits -- of the "pools" of eligible prospects from which recruits may be drawn. We have already glanced at some such pools: undergraduates at our own institutions, undergraduates at selected other institutions, professional groups outside the colleges and universities. There is another kind of pool that is becoming increasingly important, but to which we are not yet devoting enough attention. In nearly all fields, minorities -- particularly blacks, hispanics, Native Americans -- are not yet adequately represented in our graduate programs. In some fields, women are not yet adequately represented. Tapping these pools is a complex and difficult task, and some institutions are already making substantial efforts to do so, but the entire graduate study community needs to join in that effort, in conjunction with efforts at the undergraduate level and in the public schools. As these groups become a larger segment of our population, it will become more and more necessary to see that they share fully in our educational and economic opportunities. The scope of this brief paper does not permit adequate treatment of the subject of recruiting underrepresented groups into graduate study, except to note that such recruiting requires a special and sustained effort. Graduate schools cannot assume that a general recruiting effort will be sufficient to reach and attract students from these special groups. If they could, there would be no problem of underrepresentation.

Further, if women and minorities are to be recruited in increasing

numbers into programs in which they are not now well represented, the schools doing the recruiting must take responsibility for providing adequate academic and social support mechanisms for students thus recruited. Recruiting such students into a program where they are not already well represented, then throwing them into the pool to sink or swim with all the other students, is unfair to the students and will, in the long term, create greater problems than those such recruiting is intended to solve.

International students provide another source of graduate students, and here the picture is varied. In some fields, at some institutions, there is an embarrassment of riches, and some programs may need more American students to balance their international enrollment. In other programs and at other institutions, the addition of international students might provide a valuable variety and increase the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the campus. Whatever the individual case, graduate programs should recognize realistically that international students will place additional demands on the system, and they will need adequate support services to meet their needs while they are on the campus. Recruiting international students without providing such extra services is asking for trouble, and is unfair to the students recruited.

Whatever the group being recruited, I would suggest emphasis on what the graduate program can do for the student. Some institutions like to talk about their tradition of excellence, their international reputation, and the fame of their faculty. These may be matters of which they are deservedly proud, but the prospective student will want to know how those matters will benefit her or him. Students undertake

graduate study, after all, not to assist the institution and add to its fame, but rather to advance their own intellectual growth and professional development. Tell them how the institution can help them, if you want to interest them in your program.

Once a prospective graduate student is persuaded to apply for admission, that application should be handled carefully and promptly. If, as is most often the case, an application is sent to the department for evaluation and a recommendation of admission, that application should be monitored by the graduate school office to assure that it does not get lost on some faculty member's desk, or in some departmental file. We should always keep in mind that the strongest applicants are most likely to be accepted, and offered fellowships, at other institutions. If we are slow in responding to applicants, we are selecting our graduate students negatively. When we handle applications carelessly, we are assuring that our best applicants will go elsewhere.

All through the recruiting process, we should keep firmly in mind that we have ethical obligations to the students we are recruiting. It can be easy to get so wrapped up in the effort to attract numbers (and show what good recruiters we are), that we encourage students who should not come to our institution. We should be careful to not attract students for whom we do not have the right program. We should not encourage applications that are likely to be denied, just to add to our rejection numbers and show how "selective" we are. Surely there are other ways to demonstrate excellence than by counting how many times we say no.

We should be careful to avoid admitting students who are not

likely to succeed on our campus. If we cannot meet a student's needs, or if a student is not likely to meet our academic standards, we should counsel that student to apply elsewhere. Bringing a student to campus only to be frustrated, disappointed, or unsuccessful is not good recruiting.

Finally, we must remember that retention is the other side of the recruiting coin. Once we get students to our campus, we should make every effort to help them succeed. I have heard academics cite their institution's high failure rate as an indicator of their high standards. This, I submit, is irresponsible nonsense. If a high proportion of your graduate students are failing to complete their programs -- either by academic failure or by dropping out or by excessive delay -- your institution is guilty either of poor teaching or of poor admissions evaluation. If we are to actively recruit students to our graduate programs, we are assuming an obligation to those students, a commitment to provide the best possible educational experience, and the best possible opportunity to succeed.

(This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools, in December 1987, in Washington, D.C.)